



The long read

● This article is more than **8 years old**

India's crackdown in Kashmir: is this the world's first mass blinding?

A bloody summer of protest in Kashmir has been met with a

ruthless response from Indian security forces, who fired hundreds of thousands of metal pellets into crowds of civilians, leaving hundreds blinded.

By [Mirza Waheed](#)

skull Photograph: GETTY IMAGES

Tue 8 Nov 2016 07:00 CET

For the past month, while the attention of the world has been fixed on every dramatic twist in the US presidential election, the renewal of armed conflict between India and [Pakistan](#) has barely touched the headlines. In the past few weeks, the two nuclear states have, between them, killed two dozen civilians and injured scores of others in exchanges of artillery fire across the disputed border - known as the “line of control” - that divides Kashmir into parts controlled by India and Pakistan.

The [latest flare-up](#) in the long-running war of attrition between the two countries comes on the heels of a bloody summer of protest and repression in Kashmir that has now been erased from memory by the banging of war drums in Delhi and Islamabad. Since July, when the killing of a young militant leader [sparked a furious civilian uprising](#) across the Kashmir valley, the Indian state has responded with singular ruthlessness, killing more than 90 people. Most shocking of all has been the breaking up of demonstrations with “non-lethal” pellet ammunition, which has blinded hundreds of Kashmiri civilians.

In four months, 17,000 adults and children have been injured, nearly five thousand have been arrested, and an entire population spent the summer under the longest curfew in the history of curfews in [Kashmir](#).

All this has been quickly forgotten in the past two months. On 18 September, a small group of jihadi fighters, widely believed to have come from Pakistan, staged a commando raid on an Indian army camp near the northern Kashmir town of Uri, killing 19 Indian soldiers - the deadliest attack on Indian security forces in Kashmir in two decades. Indian politicians quickly blamed Pakistan, which the country’s home minister described as a “terrorist state”, while Pakistani leaders made the implausible claim that [India](#) had staged the attack itself to distract from the protests in Kashmir.

The Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, who came into office promising to take a harder line with Pakistan, announced that “those behind this despicable attack will not go unpunished”. At the end of September, India retaliated with what it called a

“surgical strike” against alleged militant camps in Pakistan-controlled territory, which, according to an army statement, “caused significant damage to terrorists”. Pakistan denied the attack ever took place - claiming that there had been nothing more than the usual exchange of fire across the border. Meanwhile, an ugly war of words continued to escalate in TV news studios, some of which were refurbished as pop-up war rooms.

Since then, the relationship between the two countries, which is at the best of times characterised by varying degrees of hate - depending upon the political temperature in Kashmir - has soured to the point where both are now suddenly finding spies in each others’ diplomatic missions. A tit-for-tat nearly every day, on TV, on social media, in ambassadorial corps - even in the realm of culture, where India has effectively banned Pakistani actors from working in Bollywood, and Pakistan has banned the screening of Indian films in cinemas. According to recent reports, civilians caught in the crossfire have been evacuated, hundreds of schools shut, and local residents pressed into service to ferry supplies to troops stationed high in the Himalayas. As always, the victims of the artillery duels have been the civilians living on either side of a border that did not exist until the middle of the 20th century.

In the war of words that has followed the bloodshed in Uri, the brutal oppression of protest in Kashmir has been largely ignored. Indeed, the Indian state, aided by a near-militaristic TV news media, has used the Uri attack and its aftermath to cover up a surge of killings, maimings and blindings in one of the longest-running conflicts in the world. This is the story of the bloody summer that Kashmiris have endured - and of why they will not forget it.

On 8 July, a militant rebel leader, Burhan Wani, was shot dead by Indian armed forces and police in a remote Kashmir village. The killing sparked a series of spontaneous demonstrations and protests, which, in a matter of days, turned into a reinvigorated popular revolt against India’s dominion over this disputed state.

Wani’s path to militancy began in another one of Kashmir’s bloody summers - back in 2010, when Indian security forces killed 120 protesters. Wani, who was then 15 years old, is said to have joined a small group of homegrown militants after he and his brother were humiliated and abused by Indian soldiers. Over the next few years, he became Kashmir’s most famous militant commander, and acquired something of a cult following among young Kashmiris, who saw him as a symbol of resistance against Indian occupation. Wani was a new breed of militant: unlike the first generation of Kashmir separatist fighters in the early 1990s, he did not cross over into Pakistan; he didn’t use a nom de guerre, and he amassed a huge following on social media, where he issued brazen challenges to the Indian state. It was therefore no surprise that thousands attended Wani’s funeral in his hometown of Tral - or that

those who could not get there organised their own funeral services across the Kashmir valley.

As Kashmiris took to the streets, police and paramilitaries were deployed in large numbers across the region. Thousands of young protesters charged at the armed forces with stones and slogans demanding freedom. Indian forces responded with lethal effect, firing bullets, CS gas, and metal pellets into the crowds. In less than four days, nearly 50 people were killed and thousands injured. More people took to the streets to protest against these killings, and the Indian forces and Kashmiri police killed and injured more of them. A cycle of protests connected to the funerals of those protesters were, in turn, fired upon, resulting in yet more killings and blindings. By the end of July, India was faced with a full-scale popular revolt in Kashmir.

An Indian policeman aims a pellet gun towards Kashmiri protesters in Srinagar in July. Composite: Syed Shahriyar/Syed Shahriyar/NurPhoto via Getty Images

The most recent figures put the number of dead at 94, including a young Kashmiri academic who was **battered to death** by Indian soldiers, and an **11-year-old boy**, whose body, riddled with hundreds of pellets, was found on the outskirts of Srinagar, the joint capital of Kashmir, in mid-September. Shockingly, more than 500 people, most of them young, were shot in the face with the pump-action “pellet guns” that the Indian forces routinely use to suppress protests. These weapons discharge hundreds of small metal pellets, or birdshot, capable of piercing the eye.

As the uprising continued, the armed forces, by their own admission, fired nearly 4,000 cartridges at stone-throwing demonstrators, crowds protesting against police brutality, and even onlookers. This means that they sent, by one recent estimate, 1.3m metal balls hurtling towards public gatherings predominantly made up of young unarmed people.

Children as young as four and five now have multiple pellets in their retinas, blinding them partially, or fully, for life. At the start of September, doctors at Kashmir’s main hospital reported that on average, one person had their eyes ruptured by pellets every other hour since 9 July. “It means **12 eye surgeries per day**,” one doctor told a local newspaper. “It is shocking.”

On 12 July, the fourth day of the protests, the state government, which is run by a controversial coalition between Modi’s Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and a local ally, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), finally issued its first official statement on the use of the so-called “non-lethal” pellet guns. A spokesperson for the government, representing the PDP, described its position to the media: “We disapprove of it ... But we will have to persist with this necessary evil till we find a non-lethal alternative.”

■ ■ There is no recorded instance of a modern democracy systematically and wilfully shooting at people to blind them

At first, the statement appeared as a typical soundbite, the sort of thing that officials must compose and recite with studied ambiguity for the press – the “government version”, as its known. But I was struck by its cavalier defence of state violence and brutalisation. It was obvious

that this was not the spokesman’s personal view; it was a clear articulation of the intent of the Indian state in Kashmir: *we have no choice but to shoot people in the eyes*.

This was an unprecedented expression of state violence. There is no other recorded instance of a modern democracy systematically and wilfully shooting at people to

blind them. At the end of August, according to data obtained by one of India's national newspapers, nearly 6,000 civilians had been injured, and at least 972 of them had suffered injuries to their eyes.

According to official records at SMHS, the main hospital in Srinagar, 570 people sought treatment after their eyeballs were ruptured by metal pellets.

Ophthalmologists at the hospital performed more surgeries in three days - from 10 to 12 July - than they had in the past three years. Many of the wounded were protesters, but not all. Not one of them deserved to be robbed of their sight.

By 14 August, as India prepared to celebrate its Independence Day, Kashmir was under a near total blackout. I briefly lost touch with my parents, as the state cut off all telephones and the internet. I was reminded, once again, of the lines of the late Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali, which still echo 20 years after he wrote them: "The city from where no news can come / is now so visible in its curfewed night / that the worst is precise." Just before the shutdown, I had talked to my youngest sister over WhatsApp - she was a little girl in the 90s, when Kashmir witnessed the first rebellion against Indian rule. "I'd never imagined my [three-year-old] child would see everything that I saw as a child," she told me.

Rebellion against India's rule over Kashmir is neither new nor surprising - and the brutality of the state's response is equally familiar. In the 1990s, India came down hard on a widespread uprising in the Kashmir valley - killing, torturing, disappearing, and imprisoning thousands. Some estimates put the number of people killed since 1989 at 70,000. Some 8,000 non-combatants are thought to have been disappeared, and 6,000 are believed to have been buried in mass graves. Human rights reports have identified thousands of cases of torture, including shocking techniques such as "simulated drowning, striping flesh with razor blades and piping petrol into anuses". According to [a 2012 report in the Guardian](#), government documents revealed that one group of security agents had "lopped off the limbs of suspects and fed prisoners with their own flesh".

■ In southern Kashmir, four girls, aged between 13 and 18, were shot in their faces as recently as last week

Years later, very little has changed in the Indian state's response to the demand for self-determination from the people of Kashmir. In a matter of four to five weeks this summer, Indian troops, with a clear mandate to be unsparing,

wounded over 10,000 people. One of the youngest - five-year old Zohra - was admitted to a hospital in Srinagar with [lacerations to her abdomen and legs](#).

Fourteen-year-old Insha was in the family kitchen when a [swarm of pellets pierced her face](#). She has lost vision in both eyes. In southern Kashmir, four girls, aged between 13 and 18, were shot in their faces last week. The prognosis for the youngest of these, [13-year-old Ifra Jan](#), "is not good", a doctor said. It is doubtful that these little girls posed a threat to the military force - estimated at 700,000 soldiers and police - stationed in Kashmir.

As the showers of metal pellets were unleashed upon protesters, bystanders and homebound schoolchildren, [hospitals in Kashmir](#) began to resemble scenes from the great wars of the 20th century. Rows of beds with blindfolded boys and girls on them, parents waiting anxiously, doctors and paramedics in attendance around the clock. On occasion, police and spies also infiltrated the wards to compile profiles of the injured, in order to place them under surveillance after their release. The wounded were brought in by the dozen, like birds in the hunting season.

All of this was incomprehensible, even to longtime observers of violence in Kashmir. One of the largest military forces on the planet could not be waging a war against seeing. Perhaps a few aberrations, a crowd-control tactic gone woefully wrong - one hoped so, but the numbers kept piling up, eye after mutilated eye popping up on the screens of phones and computers, as journalists began to publish their reports.

As none of the powerful men who run Kashmir from Delhi expressed qualms about the blinding of children, it became clear that in its hubris the Indian state had decided that snatching vision from a few hundred young people was a fair price to pay for keeping Kashmir in check. Perhaps itself blinded by a strain of arrogance peculiar to occupying powers, it continued to pummel a subject population into submission.

The phrase Raqs-e-Bismil, used in mystic Persian poetry to denote the passion of the devoted, translates as the “dance of the wounded”. In the slaughterhouse of the Kashmir valley, even the grievously injured - with pellet-scarred eyes or broken limbs - have remained defiant. “We have even got some patients whose guts are perforated and they are asking when they can go back and join the protests,” [one doctor reported](#).

Two-and-a-half decades of rebellion in Kashmir have hardened the indifference of India’s political and intellectual classes to the human cost of the country’s repressive tactics in the valley. Amid rising nationalist fervour, any sense of the basic rights of a suffering population has been eroded or vanished entirely. The hostility now appears to be total, unbridgeable, and for those on the receiving end, unbearable. Powerful TV studios urge the state to be more aggressively macho, while actively [suppressing or distorting news](#) from Kashmir. One prominent newspaper ran an online poll about the continued use of the pellets that had wounded and blinded so many Kashmiris - a clear majority voted in support. Eminent columnists speak calmly of the need for “harsh love” toward civilian protesters to rationalise the state’s ruthless response. And the Twitter account for a government initiative, Digital India, [posted a poem](#) calling for the army to murder Kashmiris until they surrender.

As images from Kashmir began to circulate on the internet - despite frequent attempts to block communications, including at least one midnight raid on the offices of a local newspaper, and a blanket ban on one English daily, the Kashmir Reader - pictures of the wounded emerged by the dozen, many of them looking as though they had ruptured fruits where their eyes should have been. On the second day of the protests, more than 50 people were admitted to the main hospital in Srinagar. Medics and parents were desperate to save vision in at least one eye for those who had been shot, attempting to extract the jagged and irregular pellets. “This only happens in [a war-like situation](#),” a surgeon sent from Delhi later said.



A Kashmiri protester who was shot by Indian security forces in Srinagar, in July 2016. Photograph: Tauseef Mustafa/AFP/Getty Images

The protocol for the use of these crowd control weapons is to aim at the legs to disperse demonstrators. But it seems that the paramilitaries and the police have been deliberately firing into faces. Some may only have minor wounds, some will suffer limited loss of vision, some will lose one eye, some both, and some will be impaired for life, but the pitiless assault on protesting adolescents forces us to ask one question: is the Indian state happy to blind a generation?

It is inconceivable that policy mandarins in Delhi or their advisers in Kashmir could be unaware of the destructive power of “non-lethal weapons”. Earlier this year, the International Network of Civil Liberties Organisations and Physicians for Human Rights published a report titled “[Lethal in Disguise](#)”. “Pellet rounds”, it stated, “cause an indiscriminate spray of ammunition that spreads widely and cannot be aimed ...” They, therefore, “are not only likely to be lethal at close range, but are likely to be inaccurate and indiscriminate at longer ranges, even those recommended by manufacturers for safety”.

Many countries have banned police from using ammunition meant for hunting animals. The multidirectional spray of pellets was designed to catch prey in flight. But many countries have continued to use them as a means of force to control civilian demonstrators.

In Israel, security forces often deploy lethal and “non-lethal” ammunition against Palestinian protesters, and crowd-control weapons have blinded at least five young Palestinians in the last two years. The use of rubber bullets by police was **banned in the Spanish region of Catalonia** in 2014, after at least seven people were blinded by them on the streets of Barcelona.

In 2011, months after the uprising in Tahrir Square that toppled an Egyptian dictator, a young police lieutenant, Mohamed el-Shenawy, became infamous for firing pellets into the eyes of protesters against Egypt’s military government. His exemplary skill at blinding civilians earned him the nickname the “**Eye Sniper**”, and his notoriety as a symbol of ongoing state brutality eventually led to a three-year jail sentence.

Will India prosecute its own eye snipers? Or outlaw the use of these weapons?

In the country’s present hypernationalist mood, every kind of other is a suspicious figure, a ready-made scapegoat for any failure that befalls the politicians determined to make India great again: the secessionist Kashmiri, the impure Dalit, the **traitorous beef-eating Muslim**, the woman who speaks her mind, the anti-national journalist, the dissenting writer. Any voices who might call for a ban on these “non-lethal” guns are certain to be ignored. To the contrary, ministers and police, and their demagogues and cheerleaders, have continued to advocate the use of both pellets and bullets against protesting crowds in Kashmir: unruly cattle must be reined in at any cost.

Because Kashmiris have become accustomed to the violence inflicted on them - as they are to the indifference of the world - when pellets were first sprayed at protesters in the heated summer of 2010, most people processed this as nothing more than a new misfortune; just another element of the war in Kashmir. If one were to draw a diagram of the assaults inflicted on Kashmiri bodies over the decades, hardly a single part would remain unmarked: in the 1990s, when the violence was at its worst, the eyes were spared; now they seem to have become a favourite target. The victims of such tactics, consciously and not, cultivate reserves of tolerance for pain, but also a capacity to remember.

I remember, too. I grew up amid the darkness of the late 80s and early 90s. I remember that most of us teenagers innately understood that being abused, slapped, or beaten with batons and rifle butts by an Indian trooper was a bit of a joke when compared to the horrors that others endured in the dungeons of Kashmir. (One of the most notorious torture centres, Papa II - a colonial-era building on the banks of Dal Lake in Srinagar - was refurbished and redecorated, and served as the

stately residence of the late pro-India politician Mufti Mohammad Sayeed. His daughter, as the current chief minister, now presides over the brutalisation of another generation of Kashmiri youth.)

I remember that the war in those years taught us to treat corpses and shrouds as reminders of passing time, which was measured for the young in massacres and assassinations. I recall, too, the tragic rupture in the Kashmiri body politic when an atmosphere of fear and loathing forced out the Kashmiri Pandits - a Hindu minority that had cohabited with Muslim Kashmiris for centuries - in an almost overnight exodus, many of them targeted and killed by separatist militants. Sanjay Tickoo, who runs an organisation for the welfare of Kashmiri Hindus, says: “Over the past 20 years, we estimate that **650 Pandits were killed** in the valley.” I don’t know what happened to Sunil and Rajesh, my childhood mates from the primary school we all attended near an idyllic river bend in Verinag in south Kashmir.

Growing up, I experienced a brutal, bleak time, as India’s response to the uprising included the grotesque policy of “catch and kill”, under which combatants and non-combatants alike were dispatched in summary executions or tortured to death. And yet, I don’t remember such a vengeful assault on ordinary people as we are seeing now. Buoyed by a belligerent nationalist at the helm in Delhi, the security forces on the ground perhaps feel emboldened to unleash a more widespread cruelty.

In 2013, an affecting **photo essay** by journalist Zahid Rafiq in the New York Times documented a few of the stories of those who had been blinded by pellets. It remains a grim testament to the darkness in Kashmir - even though the blindings at that time, amid hundreds dead, did not attract too much notice. At the time, hardly any Indian civil society group or human rights organisation thought fit to speak up about such a wicked crime. The wanton demonisation of the Kashmiri Muslim, a project that some media organisations in India take particular pleasure in, was perhaps fully realised even then. It certainly is now, when thousands, fed on a daily diet of nationalist fury, take to social media to celebrate the killing, maiming, and blinding of young Kashmiris.

That the government in Kashmir - a collection of local elites comprising career politicians, technocrats, and chancers loyal to India - considers pellet guns a “necessary evil”, might make us feel grateful. At least they acknowledge the “evil” part - perhaps to address their own guilty consciences.

A few days into this summer’s uprising, the Kashmir Observer, a local English-language daily, reported that the local government had deployed a fleet of brand new ambulances to securely **ferry visiting VIPs** to picnic spots in the valley. This was

while protesters were being killed, maimed and blinded - and while the ambulances carrying them to hospitals were coming under fire from security forces.



Victims of police shooting who have been blinded in one or both eyes in hospital in Srinagar. Photograph: Yawar Nazir/Getty Images

An ophthalmologist at the main hospital in Kashmir told the Indian Express in July: “For the first time the **foreign bodies are irregular edged**, which causes more damage once it strikes the eye.” Irregular, sharp edges? I had assumed that the pellets fired at protesters - like rubber or plastic bullets, were round discoid things. It turns out that there exist different kinds of pellets, and in 2016, some Indian forces are using the jagged variety - which inflict greater damage to flesh and eyes alike, and which doctors say is far more difficult to remove.

How did India get here? How is it all right for a constitutionally democratic and secular, modern nation to blind scores of civilians in a region it controls? Not an authoritarian state, not a crackpot dictatorship, not a rogue nation or warlord outside of legal and ethical commitments to international statutes, but a democratic country, a member of the comity of nations. How are India’s leaders, thinkers and its thundering televised custodians of public and private morality, all untroubled by the sight of a child whose **heart has been penetrated by metal pellets**? This is the kind of cruelty we expect from Assad’s Syria, not the world’s largest democracy.

Historically, such an inhuman response to an uprising - to mass dissent - has been the province of empires and tyrants. A modern democratic nation rarely unleashes such violence, except upon victims whom it does not regard as its own people. It is quite clear that for India and its rulers, Kashmiris have been subjects and not citizens for as long as Kashmiris have refused Indian rule. You do not shower

projectiles that target eyes and viscera on a people you consider your own. In snatching away the vision of Kashmiri children, the Indian state has decisively announced that it has only one message: *you must be servile and submissive, and if you refuse, we will unleash our fury.*

With a hubris derived from its might and military dominion over Kashmir, the state convinces itself that it has the power to inflict blindness. In no time, then, it blinds itself too - to the [character of democracy](#) that is its central founding principle. The harsh repression of Kashmiri protests, the Nobel prize-winning Indian economist Amartya Sen declared in July, is “the [biggest blot on India’s democracy](#)”.

It is hard not to see this mood of brutality connected, at the very least in its tenor, to the larger register of extreme violence, by both state and non-state actors, that has come to be normalised over the last couple of decades.

There has been some dissent in India. Journalists, activists, even [some politicians](#), have written elegiac [columns and essays](#) on the savage response to the rebellion in Kashmir. They have implored their government to cease the brutality, to be kind, and to [talk to Kashmiris](#). But it appears that the Indian government, clouded by a newfound chauvinism and a hunger for votes, is in no mood to listen to the nation’s voices of sanity. In August, only a few days after Indian forces in Srinagar murdered a [21-year-old cash-machine watchman](#) by firing 300 pellets into his body from close range, the Indian prime minister used a [speech on Kashmir](#) to taunt Pakistan over its own atrocities against separatists in the province of Balochistan, where the Pakistani army has inflicted forced disappearances and summary executions on the Baloch people. “Pakistan forgets that it bombs its own citizens using fighter planes,” he said. But Modi chose to forget that his own forces had, by then, killed scores of young Kashmiris.

We need to interrogate the circumstances that have led to the deliberate blinding of hundreds of young people at the hands of armed forces in Kashmir, before this too is forgotten. As some of the wounded have begun to heal, some accounts have suggested that the damage may have been less severe than initially feared - that perhaps many of those who underwent eye surgery will regain “some vision” in at least one eye. This might make one feel better - relieved that its not worse - but there is something wrong with that kind of moral reckoning, akin to the Indian security officials who continue to maintain that pellet guns must be used because the alternative would be worse. One security official told an Indian news website that pellet guns had actually [“saved lives”](#): “It is unfortunate that there have been eye injuries but the pellets are less lethal than getting hit by bullets.”

So we might ask: what if the armed forces stationed in Kashmir had fired live bullets instead? *Imagine the death toll!* But this doesn't compute: in 2016, the security forces have already killed nearly 100 civilians. Is that an acceptable number?

In a year or two, as India, and Pakistan, continue to harp on their territorialist positions, there will arrive a season of surface calm - a "return to normalcy" - in Kashmir. People will shop, marry off their children, and celebrate an uncurfewed Eid. They will also welcome tourists in their blighted land.

But when this new generation of freedom-seekers grows up into blinded, maimed, adulthood, they will carry our guilt-ridden consciences for us. They will remember more than they have seen. They will certainly remember the country that did this to them.

Follow the Long Read on Twitter at [@gdnlongread](#), or sign up to the long read weekly email [here](#).

Most viewed
